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HOSTILE CLIMATE
A State by State Report on Anti-Gay Activity

(This is the introduction to People For the American Way's 1996 Hostile Climate report. In the printed version, this introduction is followed by state-by-state listings of anti-gay incidents. To purchase the entire report in book form, contact People For the American Way at: pfaw@pfaw.org.)

Lesbian and gay issues have continued to play a major role in the public debate in the past year, as reflected in the record number of incidents reported in this year's Hostile Climate report. The November 1994 elections swept a new conservative majority into office in both the U.S. Congress and many state legislatures and, as a result, the number of anti-gay legislative initiatives has increased dramatically. Attacks on educational materials and programs with gay themes and books and films with gay characters are also up significantly from previous years. Of perhaps greatest significance, national, state and local Religious Right groups have stepped up the vitriolic anti-gay rhetoric that creates and nurtures the divisive atmosphere across the country and too often results in public policy that targets and demonizes lesbians and gay men solely on the basis of their sexual orientation.

The report that follows documents a wide range of incidents, at the national level and at the grassroots, providing evidence that the hatred and contempt that many individuals feel for lesbians and gay men has been institutionalized at the highest level of government, in corporations, organizations and even religious denominations. Sadly, those entities that should be setting the example, by standing firm for the principles of justice and fairness and working to bring our nation and our communities together, are the very source of discrimination and disdain.

The anti-gay incidents included in this report fall into one of several categories: statewide or local ballot measures; federal or state legislative battles; local ordinances; court decisions; education-related activity; arts censorship; and other miscellaneous institutional actions that contribute to the national anti-gay climate. The period covered by this report is the year between the November elections of 1994 and 1995. Our research included telephone interviews with the relevant players in these battles, as well as secondary source materials (newspapers, newsletters and direct mail from anti-gay interests).

This report is not, by any means, an exhaustive compilation of anti-gay activity in America. We have included primarily incidents that have broad policy implications or that set significant precedents. The title of the report truly expresses what is found herein: actions taken by individuals, institutions or our government that create a climate that is fundamentally hostile to lesbians and gay men. These actions are, by and large, perfectly legal (and that in itself points to a large part of the problem); they demonstrate how effective anti-gay forces have been in narrowing the circle of who is welcome as a participant in the American community. Since the report's focus is on activity that institutionalizes the hostility that so many lesbians and gay men experience in their daily lives, we have not -- except for a few notable, high-profile cases -- included individual incidents of verbal or physical assault or of discrimination, though there are thousands of them. Other organizations compile statistics on those incidents, and it is not our goal to do a comprehensive study of that

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activity. Moreover, we are well aware that our report does not convey the full extent of the anti-gay movement's impact. We have compiled, at best, a snapshot of that activity. No doubt many incidents have gone unreported.

To their credit, gay and lesbian rights activists have managed to make progress in the midst of the all-out assault against them. After defeating statewide anti-gay initiatives in Idaho and Oregon in November 1994, the lesbian and gay community and its mainstream allies campaigned vigorously against a similar measure this year in Maine, and voters rejected it. In West Palm Beach, Florida, voters defeated efforts to repeal anti-discrimination protections based on sexual orientation. In addition, activists' strong opposition kept a number of anti-gay proposals from passing in state legislatures, although the fact that the bills were taken seriously at all must be considered to have contributed to the anti-gay campaign. As significant as these victories were, the overall climate in this country continues to be shockingly hostile to lesbians and gay men.

Findings

People For the American Way's researchers documented anti-gay activity in 43 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico; a total of 180 national, state or local incidents. This represents the highest number of incidents in the three years of this report's publication, providing hard evidence of what most gay men and lesbians and most gay and lesbian rights activists believe to be true: that the climate for homosexuals in America is growing more hostile, not less.

The report begins with a discussion of national anti-gay activity, followed by a state by state listing of incidents. Among the findings:

Battles increase in the Congress, state and local government and the courts.

The past year has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number and breadth of anti-gay measures introduced in Congress and state legislatures. The new conservative majority in the Congress and the large number of state legislatures with conservative majorities has ensured that such measures will be taken seriously when introduced. In addition, national Religious Right groups have kept the mails, fax machines and broadcast airwaves full of anti-gay sentiment, feeding the mistaken belief that anti-gay elected officials are following the wishes of a majority of their constituents. The measures that have been considered range from restrictions on major federal funding bills that would prohibit discussion of gay and lesbian issues in classrooms and research facilities to limits on the content of HIV/AIDS trainings for federal employees.

-- In Montana, the state Senate passed an amendment to a bill that required anyone convicted of violating the state's "deviate sexual conduct" law (which includes homosexual activity) to register with police.

-- In Vermont, a state senator proposed an amendment to an adoption reform bill to allow adoption only by married couples and single

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people, thereby prohibiting gay and lesbian couples from adopting children.

Public schools are a major battlefield.

Public education has long been a primary target for anti-gay activists, and this year the number of education battles increased and became even more vicious. Anti-gay groups furthered their agenda by seeking to ban books and other educational materials with any mention of homosexuality, fighting any effort to provide anti-discrimination or anti-harassment protection for students, and opposing counseling and support programs for lesbian and gay youth. As more Religious Right-affiliated candidates seek and win seats on local school boards, anti-gay themes have become a prominent part of school board campaigns.

-- In Merrimack, New Hampshire, the school board voted to pass a policy banning instruction, counseling or materials "encouraging or supporting homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative." No allegation was made that any such instruction, counseling or materials was in place or proposed in the Merrimack schools.

-- In New York City, the school board voted to eliminate sexual orientation, as well as gender, age, disability and religion, from the city's multicultural curriculum.

-- At the federal level, the Rev. Lou Sheldon, chairman of the Traditional Values Coalition, received a promise from House Speaker Newt Gingrich that hearings would be held in the House of Representatives on the "promotion" of the "homosexual agenda" in the public schools. The hearings were scheduled, but then put off in the face of protest.

The Religious Right movement leads the charge.

The activity documented in this report did not just occur spontaneously in hundreds of communities across the country. A network of national Religious Right political organizations have fanned the flames of anti-gay sentiment with their radio and television broadcasts, newsletters and direct mail. These groups have provided support and technical assistance to local activists and have put significant resources into electoral campaigns and legislative battles in the Congress and state legislatures.

-- In Maine, Oregon, Washington and Idaho, Religious Right activists are at the forefront of campaigns to pass statewide anti-gay initiatives restricting the civil rights of lesbians and gay men.

-- In Texas, Concerned Women for America and the American Family Association attacked health education textbooks at the state school board level and, after the state approved the texts, in a number of local districts where school boards were making book adoption decisions. They alleged that the

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books promoted the "homosexual agenda."

Censorship is used as a tool of intolerance.

Anti-gay activists are well aware that if they can control the images of gay men and lesbians projected onto the public consciousness, they will to a large extent control the debate over gay rights. As noted earlier, Religious Right groups have been enormously successful in portraying viciously negative images of lesbians and gay men. In addition to disseminating such distorted images, these groups are succeeding in their attempts to censor any positive images of gay life.

-- In Clearwater, Florida, the local Christian Coalition chapter tried to censor Angels in America, the Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning play about a gay man with AIDS. The play was presented, but, in response to the Christian Coalition's objections, the city commission passed a resolution stating that Clearwater is "a family oriented community which works to develop a safe, wholesome environment" and requested that the theatre "be sensitive to and aware of community standards in booking performances."

-- In Clermont County, Ohio, three Religious Right organizations (American Family Association, Christian Coalition and Citizens for Community Values) joined forces in an attempt to ban The Advocate, a national gay and lesbian magazine, from county libraries, calling it pornographic. The library board did not remove the magazine but voted to limit access to it. Since that decision, one of the local Religious Right activists has joined forces with activists from other states to start a national "Family Friendly Libraries" campaign, aimed at pressuring libraries to adopt materials with a "pro-family" bias.

Defamation of gay men and lesbians is on the rise.

Just as censorship is a useful weapon in the control of "image," so does the defamation of individual gay men and lesbians (or those who are thought to be gay or lesbian) and their allies aid in the Right's anti-gay campaigns. In their fight for public opinion, right-wing groups commonly lob ugly accusations aimed at impugning the moral character of people who are good neighbors, attend church and pay taxes like other citizens -- and who also happen to be lesbian or gay or support gay rights. The goal: to convince their fellow citizens that gay men and lesbians constitute a threat to the community. Anyone, gay or straight, who supports fairness for gay men and lesbians is subject to attack, particularly public officials who support anti-discrimination efforts or teachers who try to teach about sexuality in an honest and supportive way. Some examples:

-- In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a mayoral candidate was criticized by a local pastor as "a radical, liberal feminist" who would "promote the gay-rights agenda if she is elected mayor" for listing

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her name in a local paper, along with 56 other citizens, in support of gay pride month. Despite the criticism, she was elected mayor in November.

-- In Port Charlotte, Florida, activists showed the anti-gay video, "The Gay Agenda" at a school board meeting where they were asking the school board to censor Mary Renault's The Last of the Wine, being used in a tenth-grade honors world history class. They objected to the book's references to homosexuality in ancient Greece, and they publicly vilified the teacher who had assigned the book, calling him a sexual predator, a sexual harasser and a promoter of homosexuality.

-- In Fairfax County, Virginia, Religious Right activists waged a personal attack on the district's sexuality education coordinator at the height of a battle over whether two lessons on homosexuality were to be included in the Family Life Education program. They demanded his resignation, accusing him of catering to a "very powerful homosexual lobby" and designing a curriculum "laced with homosexual philosophies and ideals." The school board voted to keep the lessons, and the coordinator kept his job.

Analysis

The spread of anti-gay political activity has reached the point where millions of American citizens now feel that their most basic rights are being held hostage to a particularly virulent form of hate politics. It is painful enough for these gay men and lesbians to know that some individuals in their own communities judge them and, indeed, hate them without knowing them at all, solely on the basis of their sexual orientation. They experience an entirely new level of pain, however -- and fear -- when they see their local, state and federal governments, the local school board, a local corporation, or an entire religious denomination enacting policy based on the same kind of irrational and hateful judgment, and when they hear political leaders using vicious anti-gay rhetoric.

The Role of the Religious Right

From the beginning of their anti-gay crusade, Religious Right political groups have been major players in the debate. In recent years, they have stepped up their efforts to exploit resentments and tap into a vein of intolerance running through our society. Implicit in their choice of targets and in their continued devotion to this battle is the cold political calculation that this is one form of bigotry that can be successfully exploited without fear of public censure or rebuke.

One has only to review the written appeals for funds, radio and television broadcasts, or newsletters of these national groups to see the level of misrepresentation, hatred and divisiveness that characterizes their anti-gay campaign. One common tactic they employ is to define gay men and lesbians only in terms of sex. Their discussions of homosexuality rarely, if ever, include any mention of any other characteristic -- work, religion, family members, service to

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the community, for example -- of lesbians or gay men. Religious Right leaders fight to keep anyone from even considering the possibility that lesbians and gay men might be full human beings with complex lives, and that sex might be for them, as it is for heterosexuals, only one small part of those lives.

The Right's rhetoric tells the story:

-- "It's not a question of denying anybody any rights. It's a question of giving special privileges to people on account of how they perform sex acts. That's what it amounts to. That is the bottom line. It has nothing to do about being good to people who are of this persuasion. It's giving them special privileges." Pat Robertson, The 700 Club, October 1995.

-- "Someone must not be afraid to say, 'moral perversion is wrong.' If we do not act now, homosexuals will 'own' America! . . . If you and I do not speak up now, this homosexual steamroller will literally crush all decent men, women, and children who get in its way . . . and our nation will pay a terrible price!" Jerry Falwell, Liberty Alliance, 1995 fundraising letter.

In an attempt to counter this one-dimensional portrayal of lesbians and gay men, Elizabeth Birch, Executive Director of the Human Rights Campaign Fund, a large national gay rights group, asked to speak to those attending the Christian Coalition's "Road to Victory" conference in September in Washington, D.C. Her request, submitted well in advance of the conference, was twice rejected by the Christian Coalition. In response, Birch rented space at the conference hotel during a lunch break, and delivered the speech she would have given to conference participants -- an open letter to Christian Coalition members. She pointed out that gay and lesbian people are the friends, siblings, sons and daughters of Christian Coalition members and that a continuation of hateful and divisive rhetoric can only lead to pain and damaged families. She continued:

I do not know when the first direct-mail letter was issued in your name that defamed gay men and abused gay women, that described us as less than human and certainly unworthy of trust. Neither do I know when people discovered that the richest financial return came from letters that depicted gays and lesbians with intentionally dishonest images. But I do know -- and I must believe that you know too -- that this is dishonest, this is wrong.

More than 4,000 Christian Coalition activists attended the Road to Victory conference; of the 300 people who attended Birch's speech, most were members of the press or the gay and lesbian community.

Religious Right leaders also repeatedly assert that the gay rights movement seeks to "recruit" young children to homosexuality. This is the premise for so much of the anti-gay activity aimed at the public schools. Some samples of this line of argument:

-- "Homosexuals don't reproduce. So they

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recruit new generations from among our children. And they are using our schools as recruiting offices." Martin Mawyer, Christian Action Network, 1995 fundraising letter.

-- "Homosexuals say they don't want the children, but boy they put a lot of energy into going after them." Robert Knight, Family Research Council, in a 1995 issue of "Citizen," the newsletter of Focus on the Family.

The Rev. Lou Sheldon, Chairman of the Traditional Values Coalition, has repeatedly attacked the gay community for "recruiting" and this year demanded that hearings be held in the U.S. House of Representatives on the "promotion" of the gay agenda in the public schools. On October 11, National Coming Out Day, Sheldon published a column in the Washington Times, in which he described a fictional scenario in which a young boy is recruited into homosexuality by attending an AIDS education class and calling a gay and lesbian hotline at the urging of the school counselor. Sheldon portrayed the counselor "help[ing] your son [to] become more secure in his homosexuality," and then described the son, at 15, coming out to his parents on National Coming Out Day: "This past Wednesday, October 11, many parents were completely awestruck and dumbfounded by what their own child told them over dinner, when their child -- whom they have raised since birth -- 'came out' and told them that he or she is a homosexual." Sheldon concluded:

Coming soon, in the House of Representatives, a congressional subcommittee will hold hearings on the use of federal funds -- taxpayers' money -- to push the radical homosexual agenda in the public schools. Every parent has a stake in these hearings, and all parents have to get involved before it's too late for their children.

The hearings have been scheduled and postponed twice, but Sheldon still claims that they will be held.

In a time when this nation should be pulling together to solve our problems, Religious Right leaders persist in their efforts to divide Americans. Homosexuality has become the winner in the "wedge issue" sweepstakes. The Right uses it to divide gays and African-Americans:

-- "I say to you that the homosexuals have hijacked the freedom train to Selma, and they're on it. And they have a message that they give, and they have rallied a number of black leaders." The Rev. Lou Sheldon, meeting with black clergy in Washington D.C., November, 1995.

-- "Black and white Christians can get together and bring the kingdom of God in the name of heaven if we can put a stop to the sodomites." A Dallas evangelist at a 1995 Promise Keepers rally in Michigan.

They also use it to try to cut gay men and lesbians off from any type of support from religious groups or people of faith:

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-- "If the world accepts homosexuality as its norm and if it moves the entire world in that regard, the whole world is then going to be sitting like Sodom and Gomorrah before a Holy God. And when the wrath of God comes on this earth, we will all be guilty and we will all suffer for it." Pat Robertson, The 700 Club, September 1995.

Given the Religious Right's success in political organizing and the relative apathy of more mainstream voters, it is no surprise that public policy reflects these vitriolic sentiments. Ralph Reed, Executive Director of the Christian Coalition, claimed that one-third of voters in the 1994 elections supported the Christian Coalition's positions. In 600 races (federal, state and local) monitored by People For the American Way in those 1994 elections, 60 percent of the candidates affiliated with, backed by or taking similar positions as the Religious Right were elected to office.

The national Religious Right groups bring experience, money, and political and media savvy to the state and local level, and are often the architects of "local" controversies over gay issues or provide enormous support to those battles once they are underway. For example, the national group The Report, responsible for the virulently anti-gay video "The Gay Agenda," opened an Iowa office this year. Shortly thereafter, the draft of a gay-positive Des Moines school district proposal was picked up by a local conservative talk show host and the entire community erupted in controversy. Accusations of "recruitment" and promotion of homosexuality were thrown around, and, eventually, a 12-year school board member and highly respected local attorney came out publicly as a gay man. The proposal was withdrawn by the school board, and in the next election, the Christian Coalition, working with a local anti-gay group, targeted and defeated the gay board member, Jonathan Wilson. National presidential politics even played a role, as Republican candidate Phil Gramm weighed in with a letter commending Religious Right leader, Bill Horn, of The Report, and "the thousands of parents who would not be intimidated by the liberal media and the radical homosexual community." Though he did not attack Wilson by name, Gramm did refer to "your dilemma with the Des Moines Public School system," and "the threat that certain agendas may have in tearing down the very essence of our nuclear families."

Plainly the national Religious Right movement has made money and gained power and visibility by attacking gay men and lesbians. They claim not to see any connection between their rhetoric and the verbal and physical assault on gay and lesbian people and it is highly unlikely they will retreat from this attack in the near future. This report bears witness to the "success" of their efforts.

Turning the Tide

This report, while documenting the increasingly hostile climate for lesbians and gay men, also tells some positive stories, including extraordinary successes in beating back right-wing groups. In Maine and Florida voters rejected anti-gay initiatives. Some courts found unconstitutional the measures that have been passed to restrict the rights of lesbians and gay men. And in hundreds of communities in dozens of states, citizens organized to fight censorship, to oppose discrimination, and to reject the agenda of hatred and intolerance.

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The success stories have two common factors: 1) a broad community coalition -- including churches, labor, business, minority groups and civic organizations -- working together, and 2) a clear message that speaks to the average American's high regard for fairness and tolerance.

Conclusion

Even though the 1994 elections made the political environment much more hostile for those seeking fairness, justice and compassion, there are signs that the American people are beginning to see what that "revolution" is really about. In Virginia's 1995 state legislative races, and in numerous local elections around the

country, voters rejected conservative candidates. No statewide anti-gay measure has passed since Colorado's Amendment 2 in 1992, despite mighty efforts by the Right to put them on ballots. To date, all courts that have considered it have found Amendment 2 unconstitutional; the issue is now pending before the U.S. Supreme Court, with a decision expected by June.

There is reason for hope, but even more reason to be vigilant and dedicated to the fight for civil rights, for respect, and for an end to the hostility to lesbians and gay men in America. The incidents in this report contain bad news and good --- the anti-gay forces are as rabid as they have ever been, but they can be defeated with dedication, hard work and strong political organizing.

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